

Healed of guilt and regret

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts on the Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 5, 2016.

I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. Galatians 1:13

Saint Paul was possessed of a brilliant mind combined with a dynamic and complex personality. His conversion was as dramatic as has ever been known. He had been convinced that Christians threatened the established religion and way of life. On the road to the city of Damascus he was stopped in his tracks by a blinding light. It took something as dramatic as that to get his attention. It must have been a pathetic sight to see this proud warrior against Christianity temporarily blinded and helpless. This intensely zealous character had to be stopped and turned around to repent.

After his conversion, he went from fighting against Christians to fighting for them. He had to die to self and be raised to the new life in Christ. To his credit, Paul readily admits how wrong he was in his persecution of Christians. The regret of his former life is exceeded only by the joy of his new life in Christ.

There is no greater spokesman for Christ than Paul. His writings are passionate. In his first letter to the Corinthians, we find one of the greatest essays on love ever written. (1 Corinthians 13) In his letter to the Romans he assures us that no persecution or hardship or power of any kind can separate us from the love of God in Christ. (Romans 8) In his letter to the Ephesians (5:22-28) he appears to be sexist, even misogynist, but then he asserts in his letter to the Galatians (3:28) that beyond being Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female we are all one in Christ. God saw the potential in this brilliant but complex man and turned him around from being a warrior against Christians to a soldier for Christ.

The other great figure of that time is Saint Peter. He pledged his loyalty to Jesus and vowed that he would never let any harm come to him. Yet, in a moment of weakness and fear for his own safety, Peter denied knowing Jesus. No doubt he regretted letting Jesus down at such a crucial time. Jesus not only forgave him but saw beyond his momentary weakness to his potential as a leader of the church in Rome where he was martyred for the sake of Christ.

Both Saint Peter and Saint Paul, two towering figures of the Christian faith, had their weaknesses. In spite of their failings and shortcomings, they were dedicated to making known the Good News of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus saw beyond their frailties to see their gifts and strengths needed for the new Christian community.

We know that Jesus forgave the people who called for his execution, Pilate who condemned him, the soldiers who reviled him and those who nailed him to the cross. We can't help but wonder if those who condemned, reviled and put Jesus to death suffered any guilt for what they did. Judas was so filled with guilt after he betrayed Jesus that he took his own life. We can believe that Jesus forgave him.

Paul felt guilty about his persecutions. Peter felt guilty about his denial of knowing Jesus. It must have come as a surprise to Peter that Jesus still had enough confidence in him to give him the authority and responsibility for leadership of the church. We would hope that others would follow Jesus' example of looking beyond our weaknesses to our strengths.

The church's mission is to relieve guilt, not to be the cause of it. Years ago, I drove a father to the hospital whose son had been hit and badly injured by a car. On the way he told me that he felt that it must have happened because he hadn't been a good enough father. My efforts at trying to convince him that God doesn't operate on a simplistic punishment and reward system were to no avail.

Often, the most difficult person to forgive is the one we see in the mirror. As long as we carry the burden of guilt we can't move on with our life. Redemption is merely a theological concept if we can't forgive ourselves. What do we do about our feelings of guilt that make us feel so badly about ourselves? Someone once told me that she didn't feel worthy to come to church because of how she was living her life. I assured her that God is more eager to forgive than to condemn and that by staying away from church she was only punishing herself. I urged her to come to the altar where she could find the strength and encouragement to amend her life.

Guilt can be cleverly used to manipulate and intimidate people. Churches of all traditions have used it for their advantage. Evangelical churches have an altar call for those who want to repent and turn themselves over to God. When revival meetings are held in a tent those who respond to the altar call are said to “walk the sawdust trail.” When you think about it we have an altar call right here every week. If we sincerely confess our sins and accept the assurance of God’s forgiveness we come to the altar to receive the presence of Christ in the sacrament. This is just as genuine as an altar call at a revival meeting.

Each of us has to come to terms with our own failings. I am well aware of mine. There has never been a shortage of those eager to point them out to me. What is important is to acknowledge our faults and do what is necessary to make amends.

I knew an unfortunate soul who whenever he took exception to what someone said or did would unleash his hurt in a nasty letter to the offender. In the end, he alienated everyone in his life until there was no one left. If you ever feel like writing a letter to someone who has offended you, go ahead and write it all down, read it over and then tear it up. It is better use of our energy to acknowledge our faults and get on with our lives.

Anyone who has suffered the loss of a spouse or partner knows what a wrenching experience it can be. You feel their absence in the empty side of the bed and the empty chair at the dinner table. It changes your network of relationships. There may be feelings of regret over unfinished business or unresolved feelings of what should or should not have been done. The sting of death can only be resolved through the acceptance of God’s mercy.

We need not burden our conscience with what we should have done or should not have done in the past. We have to free ourselves from any guilt of the past that is haunting us for the sake of our emotional and spiritual health. The only good use of guilt is that it can motivate us to take action on what we need to do. Otherwise, the rest of it is destructive.

We can’t do anything about the past, but we can do something about present and future. It is an occasion for rejoicing when we realize how God’s merciful love opens the way to the possibilities of life and hope.